

GOVERNMENTS, NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS PROMOTE PRESS FREEDOM

WASHINGTON, MAY 2-- Each year, May 3 marks World Press Freedom Day when the importance of a free press to civil society is celebrated and the state of press freedom around the world is evaluated. The day also serves as a reminder to governments to respect their commitments to upholding the fundamental rights of journalists and their public audience's right to be informed about the state of their countries and the world.

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed May 3 as World Press Freedom Day in 1993 to be a reminder to the world that in many countries the independence of the media is threatened by government censorship of newspapers and other media, and in some cases, the lives of journalists are threatened as they work to bring light to issues of public importance.

FREE INSTITUTIONS

Press freedom and the extent to which independent media thrive vary greatly around the world, according to organizations that support a free press such as Freedom House and the Committee to Protect Journalists. Press freedom is nonexistent in some countries but thriving in others. Often, there is a mixture involving some degree of press freedom but also serious restrictions. Consequently, the task of supporting independent media is complex and very much dependent on the reality of life in particular areas.

The strongest impediments to independent media are in countries "where there is an absence of mature, civil institutions -- such as a well-functioning court system, and a governmental framework that is free of corruption," according to Stanford University professor William Woo, an expert on journalism ethics.

"It's hard to develop independent media without complementary institutions," Woo says. For this reason, he adds, support for independent media is necessarily connected to broader efforts to support democracy, the rule of law and human rights. Many governments and civil society organizations around the world work throughout the year to promote the values celebrated on World Press Freedom Day.

THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) is one of several organizations in the United States dedicated to press freedom and the protection of journalists worldwide. Founded by U.S. foreign correspondents in response to the treatment of their foreign colleagues by authoritarian governments and others seeking to curb freedom of the press, CPJ operates in more than 120 countries worldwide.

According to Abi Wright, CPJ's communications director, the status of press freedom around the world has been affected greatly both by the emergence of new media, including the Internet, and by recent events such as the war in Iraq.

Today, CPJ is “focused very much on the Internet and the impact that it has had on freedom of expression, writers and journalists around the world in countries like China, Vietnam and Cuba,” said Wright. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/Archive/2006/Apr/12-842034.html>).)

For example, CPJ issues news alerts calling for the release of jailed Internet bloggers, and staff members have testified before Congress against various forms of state censorship on the Internet. In 2005, CPJ documented Internet censorship in 22 countries.

According to CPJ, current conflicts have also had an effect on the safety of journalists around the world. “The state of press freedom is linked to current events,” said Wright. “When there’s a crackdown in a country like Nepal [where 200 journalists recently were jailed], and when there’s war in a place like Iraq, it takes a toll on local journalists.”

However, attacks on the press are more widely documented today, said Wright, due much in part to organizations like CPJ, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary.

“Our work has had an impact in terms of raising the profile of attacks on journalists, bringing those attacks to the attention of governments and officials, and calling for justice,” she said. “There is more activism and advocacy taking place, which has had an impact.”

U.S. SUPPORT FOR PRESS FREEDOM

In the United States, press freedom is protected by the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment, and the scope of that protection, over the years, has been expanded and defined by various U.S. Supreme Court cases. (See related article (http://usinfo.state.gov/dd/democracy_dialogues/freedom_speech/free_speech_essay-1.html).)

The U.S. government supports press freedom worldwide through a number of programs administered in part by the U.S. Department of State.

The State Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs, for example, manages the U.S. Speaker and Specialist Program, which sends experts overseas to speak about a variety of issues, including freedom of the press. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/Archive/2006/Mar/28-443266.html>).)

Other programs bring foreign journalists to the United States to meet with their counterparts and observe journalistic practices. In April 2006, for example, the State Department announced the formation of the Edward R. Murrow Journalism Program, a public-private partnership that enables foreign journalists to study and examine U.S. journalistic practices. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/Archive/2005/Dec/14-677471.html>).)

Addressing the 2006 Murrow journalism program participants on April 21, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said that press freedom is a key to emerging democracies.

“Our Founding Fathers in the United States understood right away the importance of a free press, that without a free press to report on the activities of government, to ask questions of officials, to be a

place where citizens can express themselves, democracy simply can't work," Rice said. "You are doing some of the most important work of democracy in working as journalists."

For more information, see Freedom of the Press

(http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/rule_of_law/press_freedom.html) and Internet Freedom

(http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/internet_freedom.html).

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